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The Kopitiam in Singapore: An Evolving Story about Migration and Cultural Diversity

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INTRODUCTION

Hundreds of kopitiam (meaning coffee shop in local Chinese dialects; known as "kedai kopi" in Malay) are found throughout Singapore. While many, both old and new, are found in the city, the majority are scattered in the town and neighbourhood centres of all public housing estates in which nearly 85 per cent of Singapore's population live. Often viewed as a quintessential feature of Singapore public culture and everyday life, the kopitiam is one among several institutions and spaces in Singapore within which are embedded dynamic aspects and processes of migration and social-cultural diversity, set within the larger context of rapid changes and globalisation throughout its history. In this paper, I show how the kopitiam, historically part of Singapore's ever changing landscape, evolved into the distinct site of everyday multiculturalism that it has become today,[1] and a unique part of a living heritage in which the migration-diversity story continues to unfold.

In origin probably a small-scale village, street or neighbourhood set-up serving drinks, nibbles and sometimes meals during the colonial period of mass immigration, the kopitiam has since evolved and experienced much change over several distinct broad periods: post-World War II until the early 1970s, massive resettlement of local communities into HDB public housing estates in the 1970s and 1980s, and rapid urbanisation and globalisation since the 1980s and 1990s.

I examine the kopitiam's evolution in the following aspects of its cultural and social distinctiveness and diversity: 1) foods; 2) peoples—owners, stallholders and workers and customers; 3) social-cultural activities; and 4) local and international economic competition and connections. In doing so, it explicates the historical, social and cultural evolution of the kopitiam as a site of Singaporean multiculturalism that is derived from the continuous inputs and interactions of generations of immigrants, entrepreneurs and customers over time. At the same time, it also shows some dimensions, expressions and meanings of multiculturalism and cultural change at the local level and in the local-global nexus.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

General Theoretical Underpinnings

This paper is mainly empirical in substance. Nonetheless, several theoretical parameters broadly frame its context and its anthropological focus on cultural dimensions of social relations: a longue durée historical perspective on migration within distinct periods of globalisation; local-global nexus; the significance of migration to the cultural and social life of a locale or local community (within a city or state); and the social and cultural dimensions of multiculturalism constructed historically through migration, settlement and adaptation.

[1] I move between kopitiams in general and those in public housing estates in particular. There are many kopitiams in other parts of Singapore's urban landscape besides those in HDB housing estates, such as in the historical ethnic enclaves and in business districts, streets and downtown shopping malls but most of these do not cater to local residential communities even as they may have many features of Singaporean multiculturalism and are frequent and favourite meeting places.

Migration and globalisation, local-global nexus

In the Singapore context, a longue durée historical perspective of migration should necessarily look at waves of migration and settlement over the last 700 years or so in different eras of globalisation.[2] However, this paper covers the periods of the waves of mass and mainly labour migration throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and since the 1980s. The first waves during the era of British imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought diverse peoples, mainly from China, India and the Malay Archipelago, as well as members of the colonial class, to Singapore and Malaya to work and live in the ports, mines, plantations and emergent villages and towns. As it received waves upon waves of immigrants who settled or transited, Singapore grew rapidly from entrepot trading port to town with rich hinterlands of plantations, farms and mines in Malaya and the larger Southeast Asian region. These mass migrations effectively stopped only just before the Second World War.

The waves of migration to Singapore since the mid-1980s takes place in a new era of post-colonial economic globalisation. Coming with more varied forms and levels of skills, immigrants and migrant workers now originate from more varied Asian sources such as China, India and Southeast Asian countries such as Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and Myanmar (with a majority falling within the unskilled and semi-skilled categories), and from countries and regions further afar, such as Australia, Europe and North America (mostly skilled). These workers occupy jobs at all levels in new economic industries and wide ranging fields in the sectors of manufacturing, services, construction and communications that have fuelled Singapore's post-colonial economic growth, and often fill vacancies where locals are unavailable or unwilling to take up.

Against this broad background of the historical waves of labour migration since the nineteenth century, "immigrant society", "immigrant roots" and simply "many immigrants" are foundational themes or at least common ones in various narratives on Singapore. In scholarly works on various colonial and post-colonial nation-building state and social projects—such as economic imperatives and their labour regimes, public health, public housing, education, language, arts and literature, societal developments, social organisations, public policies and political developments—the place of immigration, immigrants and their subsequent generations appear either as explicit subjects or assume implicit presence. In this chapter, the central focus is how migration flows and settlements, through diverse groups and their cultural inputs and interactions, have historically and socially shaped the evolution of the kopitiam in public everyday life, and from a monocultural to a multicultural institution.

The kopitiam's migration-diversity story also tells us about the local-global nexus which characterise various spaces, places and communities of a city or nation-state drawn into the processes of globalisation. In Singapore throughout its history since the nineteenth century, the ethnic enclave and historical settlement, the central business district, the industrial or science park, the workplace, the home, the school, the red light district, the shopping mall, the downtown street and cyberspace exchanges are all different and specific spaces, places and communities, each with its own distinct local-global nexus. The kopitiam stands out as a unique institution with its particular local-global nexus of economic, social and cultural inputs, ingredients and infusions, through the generations of diverse people who inhabit it and through the foods and activities that they bring and partake of. At the same time, the kopitiam

[2] See Tan, Heng & Kwa (2009).

within a local community serves as a natural and spontaneous gathering point for many residents and their activities, making it the most significant public site that manifests aspects of local community and its everyday life.[3] As such, its location in the local neighbourhood, its public character and its multiculturalism make it a well placed institution to provide insights into the social life, landscape and heritage of an open and globalising city such as Singapore.

Research Data and Experiences

Research employed historical and anthropological approaches, with data drawn from historical, archival and media documents and from primary fieldwork based on conversational interviews and observations at several kopitiams in several public housing estates in the eastern part of Singapore: Marine Terrace and Marine Parade Central in Marine Parade,[4] Bedok North and Bedok South, and Eunos— these are all "first generation" housing estates built under the government's massive resettlement scheme of the early 1970s. Their populations are known to be more socially mixed or multiethnic, comprising Chinese (majority in every case), Chinese Peranakan, Malays, Indians, Eurasians and various other backgrounds many of whom were first resettled from surrounding villages, squatter areas and rental quarters in the eastern parts of Singapore in the mid-1970s, as well as new immigrant populations, such as Chinese, Vietnamese, Koreans, Indians, Filipinos, Africans, Australians and Europeans, who have moved into eastern Singapore since the late 1990s.

I did not encounter any major problems with observations, mainly because the kopitiam is such an open space and I was a regular customer to some of them. For access and interviews, I spoke several Chinese dialects (Hokkien, Hainanese and Cantonese), and languages (English, Malay and Mandarin), and sometimes capitalised on my personal background and knowledge as Hainanese kopi "kia" (child) in my childhood, and as resident, familiar customer, and interested documenter of foods. My taking pictures was initially regarded with suspicion by some foreign workers and kopitiam assistants, but once I explained my project, all were very obliging and those who had time in between work readily offered information. I later learnt from some of them that that they were afraid I might be an official from the Ministry of Environment checking on hygiene or Ministry of Manpower looking for illegal migrant workers. I returned their readiness to share information with printed pictures of them at work.

THE KOPITIAM IN HISTORY

In Early Settlements during the Colonial Period

The kopitiam in Singapore had very humble origins as a small-scale economic enterprise. Found in early settlements of plantation, workplace, village, street or neighbourhood in nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial Singapore, they sold cheap drinks, nibbles and sometimes meal foods to hungry male immigrant workers who came by the thousands

[3] Arguably, the local hawker food centre is the other significant social site, and has several overlapping dimensions with the local kopitiam, see Kong (2008).

[4] Some twenty years ago in 1988–9, I had undertaken anthropological fieldwork exploring ethnicity and ethnic relations in the public sites of the local community of Marine Parade [see Lai (1995)]. I "returned" to its two kopitiam in Marine Terrace for anthropological research for this chapter in July and August 2008, even though I have been frequenting them as an observant customer and resident of the local community since then [see Lai (2009)].

from China, India and the Malay Archipelago, and were run by individuals, small teams such as two immigrant men or (later) families. Known as "han", "tong" and "tan" in Chinese dialects, and "gerai" in Malay, some were no more than wooden carts or makeshift wooden structures with a few foldable tables, chairs and benches, often with other stalls and itinerant hawkers alongside them. In the pepper and gambier "kangkar" (plantation) settlements of nineteenth century Singapore, the forerunner of the kopitiam was probably set up alongside the liquor, provision and pawn- shops set up by the Chinese kongsi, and the same was probably true in the gambling revenue farms. As populations and demands grew, some of these expanded into modest-sized "eating shops" or "eating houses" in the main street and centres of emergent villages, enclaves and small towns, some less temporary than others, with proprieters selling both drinks and food or only drinks and teaming up with/renting out stall space to food operators. This basic formula of these early prototypes of the kopitiam worked well and persists till today.

The early kopitiam and food stalls assumed a strong ethnic dimension in their spatial distribution and cuisine, as they "followed" immigrant workers in their settlement into various ethnic enclaves and met their desires for culturally familiar foods. By 1900, the Chinese had become the majority population in Singapore, with the main Chinese clan and dialect groups being the Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew and Hainanese. Chinese "eating" stalls were thus numerous, mostly found in Chinese residential settlements and around workplaces, and typically sold a range of noodles and fresh precooked "economy rice"—meaning affordable combinations of rice with accompanying dishes such as salted eggs, fish and vegetables—such dishes cooked in their distinct versions by place origin. Similarly, when meats became more affordable, place origin versions followed suit, such as for roast meats (for example, Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka). Some shops and stalls offered *tze char* (cook-fry) or *tze sek* (cook-eat) cook to order common dishes which approximated home-cooked meals. In the enclaves settled by Indians and Indian Muslims, such food shops and stalls which came to be referred to as "kedai makan Mamak" ("Mamak" food shop in Malay) sold breads (prata, thosai) and various combinations of rice with curries and meats for meals, while "sarabat" (ginger) drinks stalls sold coffee, teas and nibbles or even fried noodles. Similarly, those "kedai" (shops) and "gerai" (stalls) in areas settled by Javanese, Sumatrans, Boyanese, Bugis and Madurese sold various nasi (rice) dishes such as padang, rawan, jenganan, lemak, sambal, spicy meats and vegetables and various cakes and cuisines from their homelands. Such ethnic foods stalls found in the pluralistic edges and areas of town, such as the old Esplanade and Selegie-Rochor-Serangoon vicinities, as well as villages, also catered to the growing pluralistic taste buds of residents and visitors.

With the sale of food and drink, the kopitiam naturally and gradually became a social centre among the largely male immigrants. Among the Chinese, its early forms were probably their only alternative gathering and meeting place to the brothels and alcohol, opium and gambling farms among the Chinese. When gambling farms were outlawed in 1829 and the colonial government tried to close down illegal gambling houses and to implement legislation on gambling throughout the nineteenth century, some kopitiams served as a front for betting and gambling dens, with mahjong and other games tables set up behind screens and in back portions of the shops. Some kopitiams also served as meeting place for *samseng* (gangsters) and secret societies members to discuss deals and for negotiations and meetings.[5] But in the main, most kopitiams were simple eateries and where, besides food, customers sought simple

[5] The author witnessed many of these meetings, negotiations and fights in her father's kopitiam and in her squatter settlement in Kuala Lumpur in the 1950s and 1960s.

rest, company and recreation. It was also a place for men to gather, as women were relatively few in the early immigrant years and were also expected to remain at home or in women's quarters. Among women, mostly only women hawkers, workers and servants were found in workplaces and markets while mostly only prostitutes, dancers, escort girls and mistreses were seen in recreation places frequented by men; women did not sit around in kopitiams to chat and idle.

As a social centre, the kopitiam was the place for men to meet and to gather for news, chats, stories and to play the occasional game of chess or cards, its strategic location in the street, village or neighbourhood at the same time providing a view of people and the world passing by. [6]News of the outside world—on immigrants' homelands, on Singapore and Malaya and on other parts of the world—came via vernacular newspapers of which copies were made available by the kopitiam and from which reports were read, alone or aloud to others many of whom were illiterate. When *Rediffusion*, the first commercial and cable-transmitted radio station in Singapore, started broadcasting services in various Chinese dialects and languages in 1949, many kopitiams subscribed to it to attract customers. *Rediffusion* not only provided hourly news but also stories, songs and music of various linguistic and cultural backgrounds and traditions, from the classical to contemporary pops, and provided many hours of free entertainment and favourite programmes to customers.[7] Similarly, the first televisions were installed by some kopitiams for customers when they became available and affordable in the 1960s and 1970s, gradually replacing *Rediffusion*.

The kopitiam was thus the place to go to at any time of the day for the immigrant and ordinary man. It was a social centre where men could indulge drinking, eating, meeting and chatting in what has become known as "coffeeshop talk" on anything that comes to mind, light or serious. It was the institution of local community and everyday public life, satisfying the need for the culturally familiar, be this foods, friends or fraternities. At the same time, it was a link to the outside and larger world beyond their immediate everyday lives and communities, through the news, views and cultures it offered and presented. Indeed, male working class culture and pluralism of the times was in no small measure due to the kopitiam's strategic location and the meals, meetings and media forms it provided and enabled in the lives of those who frequented it.

The Hainanese Kopitiam

The early history of the kopitiam is incomplete without understanding the part played by the Hainanese kopitiam. Among the Chinese, the dominance of the Hainanese in the kopitiam business is an interesting tale of the latecomer and minority immigrant group whose survival skills gave them an unexpected edge later. Mostly men arriving in large numbers to Singapore later than the other dialect groups that had already set themselves up in various occupational niches backed by exclusivist clan associations, the numerical minor and somewhat marginalised Hainanese found employment in despised or difficult work, first as farmers[8] and, as their numbers grew, as rubber-tappers, seamen, cooks, servers and domestic

[6] Chua (1995) elaborates on the kampung (village) kopitiam as the location par excellence for collective idling by males, in the current context of nostalgia for the kampung.

[7] One popular programme was the request hour. On all language channels, listeners' who wrote to *Rediffusion* for songs, music and operas to be played in dedication to friends and relatives living near or far had their requests read out and played. This also served as a means of keeping in touch with them.

[8] In the 1848 estimates of Singapore's population, most of the 700 Hainanese were mainly general agriculturalists.

servants in “dong pou kang” (domestic work in Hainanese). Over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, those who worked as cooks and domestics in European/Peranakan households built up a reputation as loyal and reliable Hylam (Hainan) “houseboys” and “cookboys”, and came to be in great demand especially by memsahibs who were highly depended on them for the maintenance of their colonial lifestyles.

Changing economic and political conditions during the turbulent pre- and post-war periods, however, saw the gradual demise of the Hylam “houseboy” and “cookboy”. Their growing demands for better work conditions and competition from well-organised Cantonese single women immigrants (the *ma-tsae*) from the 1920s onwards greatly reduced their appeal as domestics, their decline in this sector culminating in the exodus of the British in the immediate pre-war, post-war and pre-independence periods (Lee 2009: 13). Many Hainanese men were forced to enter new occupations, and they turned to what they knew best —foods, beverages and services. Striking out on their own, either singly or in small teams consisting of mostly relatives and friends, Hainanese men tapped on their culinary, housekeeping, service and management skills cultivated from working in European households to set up kopitiams, bakeries, eateries, canteens and related food and beverage industries such as coffee processing and food catering, in new conditions of self-employment. Others found waged employment as cooks and waiters in Western-style hotels, clubs, restaurants and cafes, while yet others started their own inns and small hotels. They were also joined by Hainanese rubber-tappers who were displaced from work during the Great Depression of the 1930s when rubber prices fell drastically (Lee 2009: 14).[9] Other Hainanese immigrants entered the coffeeshop trade directly, picking up trade and related skills which they gradually expanded into, such as coffee processing. Fortuitously, around the same time, there were many abandoned shops from the closure of Japanese-owned hotels and businesses due to the economic depression of the 1930s and later the war (1941–1945), and many were taken over by Hainanese for free or for very low rentals for starting up their kopitiam ventures. Their endeavours were no doubt, further strengthened by the common ideal among Chinese immigrants to get out of arduous waged labour and to do “ka ki kang”, i.e., to work for oneself and, better still, to be a successful entrepreneur based on one’s own hard work.

As such, the late 1920s to the 1950s became a period of growth and thrive during which the Hainanese gradually carved out and consolidated their distinct kopitiam business niche (Lee 2009:14–15). The now famous Killiney Kopitiam chain, for example, had a humble beginning with a shop set up in Killiney Road in 1919 by a Hainanese immigrant (http://www.killiney-kopitiam.com). Similarly, the now famous Ya Kun Toast run by the Loi family began with 15-year old Hainanese immigrant Loi Ah Koon who arrived in Singapore in 1926 and first worked as an assistant in a Hainanese coffeestall before setting up his own (http://www.yakun.com). Yet Con, Chin Chin and Swee Kee, all renowned for chicken rice and other Hainanese dishes, started operating in 1931, 1935 and 1949 respectively. Chin Mee

[9] One example is the author’s father, a Hainanese rubber tapper in first Trengganu in north east Peninsular Malaya and then Riau near Singapore. Sometime in the 1930s during the Great Depression, he left his job and set up a coffee stall with his brother in the squatter settlement of Sentul on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, registering it under a temporal cccupational licence (TOL). There were also three other Hainanese kopitiam in Sentul Dalam (Deep Sentul), while another Hainanese “Swiss Confectionery” nearby specialised in Western cakes and breads. He connected with other Hainanese small proprieters who supplied him with baked bread, biscuits and coffee-powder (based on credit), and learnt from others how to make kaya jam. However, in multiethnic Sentul, his shop was also supplied with other ethnic foods for sale such as Malay nasi lemak and cakes, while itinerant hawkers sold their foods alongside his stall, such as Indian apam, thosai, apam and porridges and a wide range of Chinese noodles.

Chin Confectionery in Katong was opened in 1925 by a Mr Tang, while the Red House Bakery and Confectionery nearby, first started by a Jewish Jim Baker in 1925, was taken over in 1931 by a Hainanese seaman Tan Siang Fuan who paid S$600 as "coffee money" for the acquisition. Hainanese kopitiams numbered between 20–30 in the three main streets of the Hainan enclave in town, and the Coffee King then, Lee Chang Er, owned seven kopitiam (Lee 2009: 18). Beyond the Hainan enclave in town, Hainanese kopitiams also sprang up in other locations such as Telok Ayer, Siglap, Chai Chee, Thomson and Nee Soon.[10] In Seletar and Sembawang areas, Hainanese cafes served British and Commonwealth troops and their families. The firm establishment by Hainanese in the food and beverages industry by the early 1930s led to the formation of the Kheng Keow (Hainanese) Coffeeshop and Eating House Owners Association in 1934, later renamed the Kheng Keow Coffee Merchants Restaurants and Bar-Owners Association (新加坡琼侨咖啡酒餐商公会) in 1952 to reflect the expansion of the business and related trades during the 1950s which was considered the peak of the Hainanese kopitiam business.[11]

The core distinctiveness of Hainanese kopitiams and eateries was their foods. Drawn from their culinary backgrounds in work in European households, some dishes were hybridised creations with Hainanese-Western roots. The breakfast of specially brewed coffee with kaya-butter toast and half-boiled eggs with soya sauce was a development of the original British breakfast; Hainanese pork chops was a soya sauce- tomato-chillie version of Western pork chop; batter for fish and chips was enhanced with beer; and inche kabin chicken a curried version of fried chicken; new cakes with local fillings were gradually added to the range of traditional Western chocolate cakes, cream puffs and swiss rolls; and Hainanese coffee merchants and kopitiam operators also developed their special recipes and distinctive forms of roasting coffee beans and brewing coffee. [12] Other Hainanese eateries offered distinct Hainanese dishes such as chicken rice, curried chicken and beef noodles. The Hainanese kopitiams, bakeries and eateries, from the late 1920s onwards, may thus be credited with introducing to the public Hainanese, Western, Hainanese-recreated local foods for Western tastes and Western foods adapted for local palates, most of which have now become iconic or favourite Singapore foods.[13] They may also be credited for foundational in developing the

[10] Present restaurant chains Han's and Jack's Place, both with Hainanese originators, were set up later. In the case of Jack's Place, the story began with immigrant Say Lip Hai from Hainan Island (date of arrival unknown) who worked as a "cookboy" cooking roast beef and Yorkshire pudding for British troops in the British naval base in Sembawang. He later started his own Cola Restaurant and Bar (date unknown) serving British and Commonwealth troops and their families in the Sembawang neighbourhood. He was invited to and agreed to set up a food catering business for Jack Hunt's pub in Killiney Road, and Jack's Place Steakhouse was eventually sold to him in 1967 (www.jackplace.com.sg). In the case of Han's Café and Bakery Restaurant chain, siblings of the Hainanese Han family first set up the Han's Cake and Confectionery shop "with the support of their parents" in Upper Thomson in 1977. Their grandparents had earlier operated a coffeestall in Hainan Street, while their father had a small share in a canteen in the British Naval Base at Sembawang and two of them had been bakers in the former Red House Bakers and Confectionery in Victoria Street (www.hans.com.sg).

[11] Membership rose from 61 at its inception to 221 in 1940 and 505 in 1950 (Lee 2009: 16–17).

[12] Coffee beans are wok-roasted with sugar, margarine and sometimes pineapple skin and maize, to a dark black brown, then ground and brewed with a sock-like cotton strainer in watering can-sized pots.

[13] The famous Singapore Sling was invented by Hainanese Ngiam Tong Boon for Raffles Hotel's long bar sometime between 1910 and 1915, and further modified over the years, including by his nephew in the 1970s. Polar Café appears to be an exception. Its founder, Chan Hinky, was a Cantonese from Hong Kong who arrived in Singapore "with only 90 cents". In 1926, he opened Polar Cafe at 51 High Street where it became a favourite haunt for wealthy merchants and the expatriate community until World War II and continued brisk business during the Japanese Occupation" (www.polar.com.sg).

kopitiam into a public institution and the strong public culture of eating and drinking by the 1950s. The parallel myth of the hardworking immigrant/poor man who "made it" from humble stall to kopitiam or café and restaurant was also thus built up during this period.[14] But where the kopitiam business became a successful niche among the Hainanese between the 1930s and 1950s, so did it attract other newcomers and competition. By the 1950s, the kopitiam and kedai kopi scene was one of hundreds of operators. Besides the Hainanese among the Chinese operators were the numerically larger Foochows whose kopitiams expanded so rapidly that they set up the Singapore Foochow Coffee Restaurant and Bar Merchants Association (新加坡福州咖啡酒餐商公会), which had about 600 registered members by the 1950s (Lee, 2009:18).

The Indian and Malay Eateries

Paralleling the Hainanese and Chinese kopitiams and eateries were those set up by Indians, Indian-Muslims and Malays which catered to demand for Indian and Malay ethnic foods by the expanding Indian and Malay populations. Some Indian-Muslim coffeeshops cum restaurants, such as Zam Zam in the Jalan Sultan area which was opened as early as 1908, sold Indian-Muslim foods such as briyani, murtabak and prata (with different curried meats) and drinks such as coffee and tea of different varieties. The first Indian vegetarian restaurant Ananda Bhavan (now a chain of four across "Little India") was founded in 1924 by Indian immigrant Bhavan in Selegie within the historical Indian enclave (www.anandabhavan.com), while vegetarian restaurant Komala's was first opened in 1947 by Murugiah Rajoo and his brothers, immigrants from Tamil Nadu, South India, after Rajoo had first worked as a waiter for ten years at Komala Vilas vegetarian restaurant in the Indian ethnic enclave in Serangoon (http://web.singnet.com.sg/~komala/, http://www.komalasweb.com/). Such vegetarian eateries sold traditional Indian vegetarian foods such as prata, thosai, vadai, pancakes, and sweets in their diverse varieties. Sabar Menanti restaurant in the historical Kampung Glam and Kampung Jawa district, famed for nasi padang and other Minangkabau dishes, was first set up around 1958 as a food stall by an immigrant from Sumatra (Omar 2005). Indeed, Indian-Muslim and Malay stalls and eateries, although smaller in numbers, have equally contributed to the making of the Singapore kopitiam as a public institution and to the public culture of eating and drinking.[15]

Resettlement into the HDB `Heartlands'

The kopitiam underwent and witnessed much change in the immediate years of independence and nation-building, beginning from the mid 1960s until the mid 1980s and even into the early 1990s for some areas. This was a period of massive urban renewal as well as countryside and farm resettlement under which the Housing and Development Board (HDB) was tasked with meeting Singapore's land redevelopment and with resettling populations from often overcrowded or dilapidated urban areas, slums, squatters and villages into newly constructed high-rise blocks of flats in what has come to be known as HDB housing estates/new towns or "heartlands". Large plots of land with numerous settlements, streets, farms and villages across Singapore were targeted for clearance for public housing and other

[14] Examples are Killiney-Kopitiam, Yakun and Jack's Place which have become major enterprises today.

[15] The historical evolution and individual stories of Indian, Indian-Muslim, Malay and other eateries within the contexts of the social history of Singapore and their respective communities need to be researched and told alongside the Chinese ones for a more complete picture of kopitiam and food heritages and multiculturalism in Singapore.

schemes or for renewal, and their entire populations moved out into new instant and highly planned neighbourhoods.[16] Along with this resettlement into new public housing was born a new type of kopitiam.

Designed as part of the infrastructure and facility in the HDB estate, this new kopitiam was typically located at each end of a row of shops and close to the other main facilities of market and hawker centre, in the new town's main and neighbourhood centres. Drinks and cooked food would be easily available, as was before in the village or street kopitiams. Most of the first takers of the new kopitiam were likely kopitiam operators and others displaced from villages and urban areas affected by resettlement and offered cash compensations, priority HDB accommodation, option for relocation into/priority allocation of HDB business premises at resettlement concessionary rental rates without going the need to go through public tender under the HDB's resettlement schemes (Lim & Lim 1985: 311–316, 326–328). Others were individual proprietors seeking new business and work opportunities, such as the Foochows. Similarly, the many itinerant hawkers and makeshift stallholders who found themselves compulsorily licensed and resettled into hawker centres and markets as part of the government's town cleansing, public health, urban renewal and resettlement programmes, also found new stalls available in the new kopitiams, hawker centres and markets in the new HDB estates.

The new kopitiam in the new public housing estate was new in one outstandingly significant sense—its multiethnic and multicultural makeup. Where previously, the kopitiam or kedai kopi was largely ethnic-based in location, cuisine and clientele, this new kopitiam was clearly multiethnic, mirroring the new multiethnic composition of the new estate whose populations were resettled from mainly ethnic-based areas and settlements. This feature became an instant reality as the kopitiam naturally became one of the first public gathering sites for those disoriented from resettlement and for reorienting them. Through it, many a co-resident or neighbour from a former community was reunited with each other, strangers became recognisable as familiar faces, and yet others befriended as members of a new social network and co-residents of the new shared community.[17] For the kopitiam operator, it now had to provide food and drink for an ethnically mixed population and clientele even as the Chinese continued to constitute the majority in every public housing estate, and this was done through the "sell drinks and rent foodstalls" formula. The typical kopitiam in the new housing estate quickly adjusted to the new environment of customers of various ethnic backgrounds and tastes through the proprietor selling drinks and several rental stalls selling a variety of ethnic foods. They also catered to those residents who began to develop a multiethnic and cross-cultural taste for foods from regular exposure in the kopitiam "Multicultural" thus became the unwritten formula for the kopitiam's survival, growth and success in the new multiethnic neighbourhood, and in doing so reinvented itself as a public place for the cultural confluence of cuisine, clientele and community in everyday life that persists and thrives to this day.

[16] For details of resettlement policy, process and impact, see Lim and Lim (1985). For a detailed longitudinal case study of resettling a village, see Chua, Sim and Low (1985). Unfortunately, the study did not track the resettlement consequences for the village's one and only coffeeshop.

[17] Conversations with older residents resettled in Marine Parade from various villages and areas around the East Coast and from central town areas.

THE HDB HEARTLAND KOPITIAM TODAY

There are 1,963 food courts, coffee shops, eating houses, cafes, coffee houses and snack bars and 322 coffeeshops in Singapore today,[18] among which hundreds of kopitiam are found mainly in the HDB heartlands. Opened everyday from dawn till nearly midnight, their manifestation as a public site of multiculturalism is best understood by way of the kinds and flows of foods, people and activities in and out it.

Foods, Foods and More Foods

The common lament "nothing to eat today" belies the taken for granted but vast variety of foods sold in the ordinary HDB kopitiam throughout the day. Broadly, they can be categorised by type of meal (breakfast, lunch, dinner or supper), although their items overlap tremendously and people may eat any kind of food and in any combination at any time of the day. Culturally, they mainly range from Chinese to Malay, Indian/Indian-Muslim and "Western", (see Appendix 1), derived and hybridised historically from an earlier immigrant past that brought flows of people and their foods to Singapore. Individual items such as chicken rice, noodles, roti prata and nasi padang, once identified as ethnic and introduced by/for immigrants, is now iconic of Singapore food and readily available in most kopitiam as basic and popular everyday foods. The Hainanese-Western half-boiled eggs, kaya toast and coffee set is now standard breakfast fare in the kopitiam.[19] The "economy rice" stall that once offered a cheap combination of rice and dishes to poor Chinese immigrants retains its status in the kopitiam as its major stall, but with an expanded range of traditional home-cooked style foods, while the other main stall, the *tze char* Chinese kitchen is now in effect a small restaurant serving a wide range of cook to order Chinese dishes, including favourite seafoods and steamboat, still at affordable prices. The Indian/Indian-Muslim foodstall selling roti prata, chapati and meat dishes, the Malay stall selling mee rebus and meat dishes, and the "Western" stall offering local versions of Western foods (chops, steaks, grills, fries) are the at least three other "must-haves" for a kopitiam to be "complete". Traditional ethnic foods abound (see Appendix 1), and so do hybridised and multicultural versions of individual items, such as noodles (Chinese dry, fried or soup and by dialect group, Indian mee goreng, Malay style mee Hong Kong), rice (Chinese, Malay or Indian style with a wide range of meats; fried Chinese, Malay or Indian style); nasi lemak (Chinese, Malay), curries (Chinese, Hainanese, Malay, Indian), breads and pancakes (Chinese-Western; Malay roti john, roti boyan, roti jala; Indian roti prata, chapati, tosai, putu mayam); and rojak (Chinese, Malay, Indian style). A diversity of drinks available match this food "fair", and are often ordered in their hybridised Singlish names, such as "tak kiew" and "Michael Jackson" (see Appendix 2).

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[18] (http://www.business.gov.sg/EN/Industries/FoodNBeverage/StatisticsNTrends/FactsFiguresNTrends/fnb_overview-breakdown-Others.htm, accessed 3 Jul 2009) and http://www.thegreenbook.com/Tgbnewsite/Productsevicesearch.aspx?search=coffee+shops&hgd=&hid, accessed 3 Jul 2009). Total membership of outlets registered with the Keong Keow and Foo Chow associations vary between 700 and 1,100 (figures vary according to various reports). A National Environmental Council's report mentions 800 coffeeshops in HDB estates and 550 in pre-war shop houses on its toilet upgrading programme, 7 February 2004.

[19] Only that the coffee is lately being `challenged' by a Milo drink offer in a fierce competition (and perhaps resolvable with a compromise hybridised combination of "milofee" [Milo and coffee]?)

For the individual, what to eat is sometimes faced as a difficult choice but only because of exposure to the wide range, and most have developed at least a mildly multicultural taste. In the early years of resettlement, it was probable that residents went about trying and tasting foods of other ethnic cultures available in the kopitiam. By today, even the older Chinese resident resettled from an ethnically homogenous village would have learnt to desire roti prata for breakfast one day and nasi lemak the next, or mee rebus and nasi padang for lunch. It is now common practice for an individual to rotate different ethnic dishes among his or her meals at the kopitiam, and common for members of the same family to be eating different dishes at the same time, for example, father eating pig's organs soup, mother eating nasi padang and children eating pizza.

A kopitiam's range of ethnic foods also varies by location and customer base. In the kopitiam that serves a neighbourhood with a predominantly Chinese population, there are more stalls selling Chinese foods. For example, stalls in 128 Kopitiam in Bedok, besides offering popular dishes such as roast meats and noodles, also serve distinctly traditional Chinese dishes such as teochew porridge, szechuan duck, black chicken, pig's tail and organs soup, pig's trotters, and frog legs and turtle soups. Similarly, the local kopitiam in a neighbourhood with a larger Malay/Muslim base may have more stalls serving Malay/Muslim food and some are indeed wholly Malay/Muslim kopitiams, such as Mukmin Restaurant in Bedok. First set up in 1974 by Mr Mansur when its neighbourhood was completed and the first batches of resettled residents had moved in from villages in and around Bedok, the restaurant's stalls serve a range of Malay and Indian-Muslim foods and desserts, the classics being various kinds of rice with spicy meats and vegetables, breads and cakes as well as Malay and Indian hybridised versions of Western foods.

Some HDB kopitiams and specific stalls have also attained fame for their foods within the estate or beyond, and are sites eagerly sought out by "foodies" who are prepared to "travel" all over Singapore to eat. Together with upmarket restaurants, hawker centres, markets and food courts, kopitiams "appear" on local food and heritage trails, with the exchange of information, such as on their locations and individual food items and on experiences, opinions and ratings on quality and service, conducted by word of mouth among relatives, friends and colleagues, and among strangers through the internet.[20] Mukmin Muslim Restaurant in Bedok for example, was and still is well known for its range of Malay kuih-muih (cakes and desserts) and, according to one stallholder, "people from all over Singapore, from as far as Woodlands, will come here to eat and buy our food". Similarly, the *tze char* stall formerly in MP59 Kopitiam in Marine Terrace now relocated to Bedok is attracts crowds from beyond the estate especially on weekends while the currypuffs sold by `The Malay Sisters' stall are hot favourites known to most residents. Their claims to fame and sometimes ownership of a particular dish are based on "first setup", originality, authenticity, cultural heritage and tradition, special skills, styles and ingredients, and sometimes simply being the offspring of an original stall, and any award received, positive media coverage by food tasting experts or patronage by a celebrity or politician is given prominent publicity through pictures and pinups on the stall's front.

[20] Some informative and interesting websites, food forums and blogs are foodlane.sg, www.makansutra.com, www.hungrygowhere.com, www.makantime.com, soshiok.com, www.goodfood.sg, www.yebber.com/review/category/eating-places/coffee-shops/, www.ieatishootipost.blogspot.com and www.eateatenate.blogspot.com. Some sites also carry information and experiences on poor foods and service.

Since the 1990s, the range of foods that have shaped and substantiated Singapore's already diverse culinary landscape are being further infused with new ingredients and inputs. In Marine Parade and Bedok kopitiams for example, the traditional "Western" food stall now additionally serves burgers, pizzas and spaghetti besides chops and steaks; ayam penyet is currently the rage in Malay cuisine; the Chinese ban mian (noodles) stall in V Star kopitiam is fairly well patronised; while Korean, Japanese and fusion foods (e.g. beef carpio ramen, XO fried rice and salad) have been added to some kopitiams' repertoire. A Botak Jones outlet serving American foods recently (July 2009) set up in a kopitiam in Marine Crescent is doing brisk business. Its parent company (set up by immigrant American Bernie Utchenik turned Singaporean and his Singaporean wife Zee) was born out of the acute observation that there is a "definite lack of availability of good, well made western food in the industrial and heartland areas" (www.botakjones.com). It cleverly recognises the strength of location in the "heartland" coffeeshop:

Botak Jones is always finding ways to bring the quality of food and service into a more comfortable, everyday setting, which translates into coffee shops and eating houses, where people feel at ease and can dress as they wish and be themselves. While there is a plethora of fine food in Singapore, it is located in areas where the Heartlander may only visit from time to time if at all. By presenting Botak Jones in their estate, it makes this quality of food and service available on a daily basis… we feel that everyone should have the opportunity to taste what the world has to offer no matter where and how they live" (www.botakjones.com).

In the highly competitive and fluid culinary environment of Singapore, some dishes and stalls will certainly "die" (fusion food Asia.com closed a year after it was set up in VStar in Marine Terrace). What is firmly established is the concept of "multicultural" in the kopitiam itself—it has to offer a wide range of ethnic, hybridised and now even "national" foods that meet the ethnic, multicultural and adventurous palates of customers and at affordable prices,. In turn, it is the strong public culture of eating a diverse range of foods that sustains the multicultural kopitiam's survival and success.

People of the Kopitiam

Kopitiam owners, stallholders and workers

The kopitiam sole proprietor sitting at the till or making coffee, dressed in his white sweatshirt and stripped pajama pants, is a sight of the past; today's HDB kopitiam owner is more likely an absentee landlord who owns several kopitiams in various parts of Singapore. This is a consequence of intense competition and capital movements in this lucrative business, in which older founding proprietors unable to keep up with competition or wishing to retire have sold their shops to new and aggressive players.[21] Additionally, children of kopitiam owners are reluctant to take over their parents' trade because of its long hours, hard work and low status, as a result of which there has been a break in the intergenerational transfer of the trade and its skills.[22] All kopitiams observed in Marine Parade have changed hands twice

[21] Lim Bee Huat, founder of the Kopitiam chain (with about 70 outlets including five coffee shops as at August 2009) bought his first kopitiam in Bishan Street 11 housing estate with a "jaw-dropping" bid of S$2.01 million, and the shop's value later rose to S$6 million (The Kopi Tiam King, www.kopitiam.biz/content/showcontent.asp?section=success, accessed 22 Sept 2008).

[22] The early Hainanese were well known to invest in their children's education for upward economic mobility, as a result of which their well educated children did not want to take over their kopitiams.

since the late 1990s and early 2000s and two in Bedok were about to at the time of fieldwork, with the exception of Mukmin Restaurant which has been taken over by the founder's son. MP59 Coffeehouse and VStar Coffeehouse in Marine Terrace, for example, were recent acquisitions (around 2004 and 2006 respectively) by a Malaysian and a Singaporean man. The latter's "China wife" comes daily to inspect the shop and then go to check her other shops," according to one stallholder. It appears that big capital is replacing the locally-based small proprietor. Visually, ownership and management changes are reflected in kopitiams' names and signboards. Increasingly, Chinese kopitiams no longer carry actual or symbolic Chinese names carved on wooden signboards mounted on two lion stands; instead, they are named symbolically after (lucky?) numbers (W326 Coffee Shop and 123 Coffee Corner in Bedok, MP59 in Marine Terrace) and other fanciful names such as VStar, the names laminated on plastic boards lit with neon lights.

Kopitiam stallholders (as well as in hawker centres) tell a complex story of intergenerational transfers of their small family businesses and adjustments to mainly economic pressures of rising costs and competition. In general, stalls have historically been run by a sole proprietor or as a small family enterprise, sometimes aided by a worker or assistant. Father and son, husband and wife and sibling teams were common. But like the children of kopitiam owners, stallholders' children are also reluctant to take over their parents' trade because of its long hours, hard work and low status of the trade and the wide range of alternative occupations for those upwardly mobile. As a result there has been some loss of culinary skills and secrets (a deterioration of tastiness has been detected by some foodies and food critics) and some stalls have closed when their operators retire.[23] Additionally, since the late 1990s, rising costs and competition have led stalls to close for good or to move to less competitive areas in neighbourhoods, away from town centres where rents are higher and competition stiffer.

Some founders of stalls, some of immigrant or first-generation backgrounds, are still running their businesses. However, steep rises in rentals since the early 2000s have seen many stalls close or relocate, some several times, as in the cases of several stalls in Marine Parade and Bedok. Father and sons team of popular Hainanese Chin Swee Chicken Rice stall (the father was once a cook in the famous Swee Kee Chicken Rice restaurant in the Hainanese enclave in town) moved out of VStar in Marine Parade to Katong and then to Bedok because of rising rents; another Hainanese chicken rice stall in 123 Coffee Corner Bedok, in the same business for 30 years, has moved several times within Bedok to neighbourhoods with cheaper rents. Peter Banana Leaf char kway teow stall moved from kopitiam to kopitiam in Marine Parade, Katong and Bedok for the same reason. The stallholder of Lao Feng Turtle Soup in Block 128 Coffee Shop intends to retire soon as rents and costs of ingredients have spiralled, after "some tens of years" in the business and also because his "highly educated" son never had any interest in it. In the case Mukmin Restaurant, stalls are still family-run, although younger generation members hold other full-time jobs and only assist after work or during the peak Ramadan season.

Marine Parade Laksa run by a husband and wife team in Block 128 Coffee Shop in Bedok North is a classic stall story about its start, growth and possible end with its relocation amidst competition and rental rises. Starting as itinerant hawkers carrying their laksa on shoulder poles in old Joo Chiat/Katong in 1950 when they were in their early 20s, they relocated from Katong where they had been in a shop for decades to Marine Parade when rent controls were lifted, and then to Bedok, following rental rises. Now in their early 80s, their last move from

[23] See Huang (2008) and Yen (2008).

a $3,000 per month rent in Marine Parade to their current $1,500 monthly rent in Bedok might well be the last, although their grandchild is running a similar laksa stall in Katong where "laksa wars" among competing stalls have occasionally taken place. Like many stallholders who have relocated from their original places where they built up their name and reputation, the couple has kept their Marine Parade Laksa name (and stated year of starting their business on their signboard) to capitalise on it even though they are in Bedok. The stallholder scoffs at some well publicised laksa stalls in Katong claiming originality and fame even though they were set up much later than her's. "Famous does not mean tasty" she says as she painstakingly cut up some fishcake ingredients, then adds, "we made our own ingredients in the old days".

Hard work, long hours and low wages in the kopitiam and foodstall trades—a constant feature since their early days - has led to a current shortage of workers, in part arising from the absence or reluctance of Singaporeans to enter them. The solution has been the hiring of cheap foreign workers, sometimes illegally. Under the law, sectors such as services and manufacturing must employ a minimum number of Singaporeans or permanent residents (five before June 2009, nine as from this date) before they can hire foreign workers, while only Singaporeans and permanent residents are allowed to work in food stalls, including *tze char* stalls.[24] On the increase, foreign workers hired as assistants, servers and cleaners are mainly from China (both men and women) and East Malaysia (men); cooks (men) and *tze char* kitchen staff are mainly from Malaysia and increasingly from China, while "beer ladies" are from Malaysia and China. On the whole, there is a perceived influx of workers from China in hawker and foodstalls and kopitiams as well as in the larger service industry. In Chinese kopitiams, workers from China on two-year contracts are by now a taken for granted sight, while other nationalities are also entering the scene, such as Filipinos (Othman 2008). Visually, the scene of workers in many a kopitiams today is a mix of locals and foreigners of several nationalities. The locals tend to be older men and women who are the identifiable "aunties" or "uncles" wearing waist pouches for small change; the cooks tend to be younger Chinese men from Malaysian small towns; while the servers and assistants tend to be young men and women from China and who seem to work for short periods before being replaced by another batch of workers from China in what appears to be a rotation, possibly to avoid detection of illegality.

The hiring of foreign workers has in turn kept local wages low and led to competition between local and foreign workers for jobs,[25] as well as spawned some stereotypes of both locals and foreign workers especially those from China. The former are portrayed as choosy and unwilling to work long hours, while the latter are variously seen as *xiao lung nui* (little dragon ladies) who are potential husband-stealers (women beer servers) and incapable of

[24] Both the Foochow Coffee Restaurant and Bar Merchants Association and Kheng Keow Coffee Merchants Restaurant and Bar Owners Association are jointly appealing for this no-foreigners rule to be relaxed (*The Straits Times*, 5 Jul 2009).

[25] See various articles in the Straits Times: Taking jobs away from locals (12 Dec 2007); Language problems in service (12 Dec 2007); The coffee shop divide (27 April 2008) and `Are locals shunning jobs at tze char stalls?' (5 Jul 2009). The labour shortage and related wage problems in the larger services sector have also led to the hiring of "phantom" workers (The Sunday Times 22 Feb 2009). Under the law, sectors such as services and manufacturing must employ a minimum number of Singaporeans or permanent residents (five before June 2009, nine as from this date) before they can hire foreign workers. Some employers get around this by employing local workers in name only and contributing to their compulsory Central Provident Fund—this makes them seem to fulfill the local worker requirement on paper and allows them to hire cheaper foreign workers in reality.

cooking (kitchen assistants). As one customer put it: they don't contribute to the cooking culture, they are just cheap labour; they don't know how to cook local dishes, only *ban mian*".

Customers

In contrast to an earlier time in immigrant history when it was where mostly men met, the kopitiam's customers today are families, schoolchildren, social groups of men, women and youths and individuals who are mainly the local neighbourhood's residents and who frequent it regularly according to their everyday life schedules and needs. It is the place where individuals get a meal at any time of the day, hurriedly or leisurely; where elderly women gather for a prolonged breakfast chat after exercising or marketing; where domestic workers meet for a quick chat before/after marketing or bring the elderly person in their care to for a breakfast; where schoolchildren take breakfast and lunch; foreign workers, working couples and families eat dinner after work; where beer drinkers socialise and where retired residents idle. Opened everyday and open to all, the kopitiam is, at different times of the day, week, month and year, a lively site of everyday life of the local community in which HDB "heartlanders" of various age, ethnic, income and work backgrounds make their appearance to eat, drink, socialise, while away the time or simply to feel the presence of others. Now a taken for granted scene, women, including Muslim women, eat and drink in the kopitiam in same-sex or mixed groups or on their own, in contrast to an earlier time when women would not be found in it except for workers and stallholders. Young children, such as "latchkey" schoolchildren whose parents are out working, can also safely eat there on their own. The down and out, the storyteller and the joker too can find their own spaces in the kopitiam. It is the public home ground of the *Ah Laus*, *Pakciks* and *Makciks* (references to the elderly in Chinese and Malay) and *Ah Bengs*, *Ah Lians, Mats and Minahs* (references to the Chinese and Malay young).

Activities and Community

The kopitiam is at once a place of intense colours, sounds and activities. Customers queuing to buy food, stallholders shouting out orders, cooks frying aromatic foods, cleaners clearing tables, people eating and chatting, advertisements jostling for wall space, the television screening programmes—these are the scenes of the multicultural site that the kopitiam is with its everyday life public culture in the local community. It is seldom quiet except in the early morning and late at night. In recent years, some kopitiams have grown in size and scale, some becoming foodcourts with extra seating outdoors in front and side spaces. But by and large, by virtue of its location within a residential setting, the heartland kopitiam is a place that provides a sense of social intimacy and sense of community for residents living around its neighbourhoods. And as if in a play about everyday life, they all make their appearances as if to perform on the stage that the kopitiam is.

Shared eating place offering a diversity of dishes for a range of customers, the kopitiam offers a sense of being open and equal to all,[26] with boundaries temporarily removed or well negotiated with an order of civility honed over time. The well dressed office worker and the pyjama-clad *ah soh* (elderly lady) in her wheelchair, the retired *pakcik* (elder Malay man) and the school student—all may enter the kopitiam and share space at the same or adjacent tables;

[26] Chan (2003: 132, 135) noted the imagined and temporary equality and social cohesion found in the local coffeeshop where strangers of different ethnic and work backgrounds share tables while eating separately, reflecting the heterogeneous nature of the multiethnic community.

it is normal to ask "can I sit here" and unthinkable for one to reply "no, you cannot". Nor are the down and out turned away, and someone may buy them a drink or a meal. In V59 kopitiam, nobody bats an eyelid or teases when the mentally disabled Sham comes dressed as a FIFA coach or a soccer player when the television screens the European soccer championship games live.

The negotiations of religious diversity and its boundaries further exemplify the sense of intimacy and community in the kopitiam as well as the strength of its multiculturalism's tolerance and code of civility. Visually, the signboards of Muslim kopitiams and stalls typically have green and yellow icons of mosques, crescent moon and star and Arabic inscriptions about Allah being the greatest provider, while Chinese owned kopitiams typically have an altar for the deities deemed important for the shop's safety and prosperity and which reflects the owner's own religious background. Alongside the availability of diverse foods, religious boundaries mainly along `halal' for Muslim food and "non-halal" for the others are maintained within the one same kopitiam. Stalls themselves observe these boundaries in food preparation and service, such as with colour coded crockery. While Muslim stalls are easily patronised by non-Muslims, the Chinese-run stall, such as the one selling *yong tau foo* (beancurd items with fish meat stuffing) in W326 Coffee Shop, Bedok, carries a "no pork no lard" sign to attract Muslim customers comfortable enough with this boundary. Customers themselves demarcate eating spaces within an unspoken but well understood code of eating different and halal/non-halal dishes at a shared table or common space.

Religious events further highlight religious diversity and its negotiation and tolerance. During the month of Ramadan, Muslim customers do not consume food during fasting time and Muslim stalls may operate at different hours and sell special food items for the breaking of fast, such as dates and desserts. In the case of Mukmin Restaurant, its daily opening hours are closer to the time for breaking fast, when there is a frenzied sale of foods by the stalls and the owner also offers free food to the poor and needy as a gesture of almsgiving. It is also a time for non-Muslim customers to savour the foods of the Ramadan season. For Chinese kopitiams and stalls, offerings are made daily and on auspicious occasions such as during the Seventh Month Festival and Lunar New Year. They also usually join in the Seventh Month offerings and dinner organised by the local shopkeepers and merchants association, while the *tze char* stall usually offers special dishes such as *lou hei* on significant days of the lunar new year. Decorations by the kopitiam and stalls may also be put up during significant festive seasons for atmosphere, luck and customer attraction. In general, the code of civility for tolerating and accommodating religious taboos, needs and practices in the kopitiam are well developed and understood by stallholders and customers alike, honed through everyday practice over time.

As social centre, the multicultural kopitiam has come a long way from its early days of being inhabited by immigrant male workers. Now, it is a place for everyone, and for the retired or the lonely, especially the elderly and locale-bound, it is the place to go to feel the presence of others and of community. As in the past, it remains a window to the world, only that media access to the world beyond the local community has come a long way—cable *Redifusion* and printed newspapers have been replaced by cable television. There is always something to watch, from news and cartoons in the morning to soap operas and documentaries in the afternoon and local sitcoms and reality shows in the evenings. Highlights are "live" sports competitions such as the Olympics and events such as local and international soccer league games, when especially men, fathers and sons, foreign workers and beer drinking groups turn up to watch, and from which new Singlish terms are spawned, such as names like Pang Pow

[firing cannon in Hokkien] for Arsenal and Tok Tok Ham for Tottenham Hotspurs soccer teams. Indeed, the kopitiam is one of the few public places where Chinese dialects may still be heard and everyday local terms and Singlish language further developed ("palata" for "prata"; "who man say?" [who said so?] and "you sit I bring you" [please be seated and I will bring you your order].)

Chats and discussions about world and local events, jokes, stories, personal histories and various matters big and small continue to be conducted and heard abundantly in the true tradition of coffeeshop talk. At one sitting at a shared table for example, I heard an elaboration by a middle-age woman of why "*si chea ping an, nan nui peng teng*" (world peace and gender equality) is most important for her, having "witnessed so much" in her life. At another, a retired hawker told me her work history, including how even doctors frequented her stall and dared to eat her pigs innards dish because of trust in her cleaning method (which she elaborated on) but also how she would not allow her children to inherit her trade. At one table, an articulate man pronounces his views on political matters while reading out news items to his circle of friends—this he does without fail most mornings when they meet for breakfast. It is easy to both eavesdrop and to engage in conversation in a kopitiam.

In contrast to the heydays of male-dominated gambling and gangsterism when some kopitiams served as dens and meeting venues, most neighbourhood kopitiams remain places of peace and safety even if the rare brawl or police raid for illegal money-lending loan sharks and soccer betting might still occur in some "rough" neighbourhoods.[27] Besides eating, chatting and watching television at the kopitiam, one indication of peace, belonging and community within the larger neighbourhood is when children and youths play together in the playground, basketball court or street soccer pitch nearby, and adults play chess[28] or take part in a common hobby and interest. One such hobby is songbird rearing, a traditional pastime activity common to both Malays and Chinese, especially men.[29] It is common for bird owners to bring their pets daily to the kopitiam where, in cages hung on tall stands outside, the birds stimulate each other to sing while their owners drink, chat and compare notes on their hobby. In the vicinity of the Marine Terrace kopitiams, the practice ceased when the bird stands were removed during infrastructure upgrading. In contrast, songbird rearing in nearby Bedok seems to be thriving and there is even a "bird singing group" at W326 kopitiam. In the space next to the kopitiam, the bird-rearers and their twittering songbirds appear by the dozens on weekdays and hundreds on weekends, and make a sight to behold. On one weekend in Sept 2008, a nationwide contest for the top ten *jambul* and *mata putih* songbirds was held by the group with trophy prizes donated by W326 kopitiam. Indeed, regular songbird contests are held in various HDB locations throughout Singapore, such as Bedok, Ang Mo Kio, Clementi and Woodlands, with information spread nationwide by word of mouth and posted in bird shops. It is difficult to establish if there is illegal betting involved in the contests; what is strikingly clear is the existence of a community of young, middle-aged and elderly *Bengs* and *Mats* brought together by their songbirds.

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[27] Other issues in which there may be random checks by government authorities on kopitiams and stalls for the implementation of legislation and public campaigns involve mainly public health (anti-spitting, clean toilets, clean kitchens, proper preparation and disposal of foods, and anti-smoking). The coffeeshops also encountered customer unhappiness with the implementation of a smoking ban in July 2006, as big crowds of customers like to drink and smoke while watching "live" soccer matches.

[28] See Lai (1995, 2009) for interethnic dimensions of play among youths and interaction among men in the local neighbourhood.

[29] See Layton (1991) on songbird rearing as a pastime in Singapore.

A NEW CHAPTER IN THE KOPITIAM STORY

Kopitiams in general and the heartland kopitiams in particular are experiencing a new set of changes since the period of urban renewal, resettlement and adjustments. Since the early 1990s, there appears to be growing competitive pressures, with original owners letting or selling their shops to new operators and tenants moving in and out of food stalls amidst a general trend of accelerating costs of food ingredients, rentals and living costs. The demise of old kopitiams and stalls, either because of retirement, rental hikes or acquisition by new players, will probably go unremembered. It is the stories of the continuation and expansion of those early kopitiams and eateries that had a headstart and that are now managed by subsequent generations of family that are being told, such the cases of Jack's Place, Hans[30], Killiney, Yakun (all Hainanese), Bhavan and Komalas (South Indian) and Sabar Menanti (Indonesian/Malay) that have all opened numerous new outlets throughout Singapore. There are also new `rags to riches' success stories, such as that of Pang Lim, the thirteen-year old kitchen helper who became Koufo foodcourt chain boss[31] and Lim Bee Huat, the nine-year old "kopi kia" who became "kopi king" of Kopitiam chain.[32] Lim Bee Huat even has a "I'm Just a Kopi Boy" theme song which captures his experiences of childhood poverty and dreams of "a kopitiam on every street" and hopes "to fill the street corners with coffee, kaya toast and eggs" (http:www.kopitiam.biz).

Kopitiam Competition

Today, the dominant trend in the food and beverage industry in general is that of fierce and relentless competition, which poses insecurity to the small player but opportunity to those with head start, capital, entrepreneurial acumen, family succession and support, intergeneration skills transfer and sheer personality.[33] Old kopitiams are being acquired and renovated. There are new and hybridised versions of kopitiam such as cafes, food courts and food `villages' being set up in housing estates as well as shopping malls, stations and other strategic locations throughout Singapore. Some of the big players have rebranded themselves, implementing new concepts for `the eating experience' [34] and customer membership privileges, offering new combinations of dishes and services, acquired state of the art kitchen technology for food preparation, and using modern marketing strategies and management systems complete with websites that spell out history, mission statements and values besides, of course, their food specialities. Besides locally, some have also expanded regionally and

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30 See Heng, All Hans on Deck, 2009.

31 Pang variously worked variously as kitchen helper, street hawker, fruit seller and coffee shop stallholder. He opened his first coffeeshop in 1990 with his younger brother and uncle, renting out the stalls and managing the drinks stall themselves. Pang is now the managing director of *Koufu*, which operates about 30 foodcourts, five coffee shops and five cafes around the island, mainly in HDB heartlands (The Straits Times 14 April 2007; www.koufu.com.sg/profilehistory.html).

32 Lim Bee Huat started as a coffeestall assistant clearing tables, washing dishes and delivering food but harbouring entrepreneurial ambitions and making acute observations about the trade along the way. He bought his first kopitiam in 1988 and from there moved swiftly to set up outlets which today number about seventy, ranging from kopitiams to foodcourts, cafes and kiosks (http://www.kopitiam.biz/content/showcontent.asp?section=success).

33 Renewed local businesses are also posing competition to foreign coffee outlets such as Starbucks, Spinelli and Coffee Beans which had expanded rapidly during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

34 For example, Komala's Restaurants is a fast food self-service concept offering traditional Indian vegetarian food in a (hybridised) Western fast-food setting.

internationally, such as Komalas, Kopitiam, Hans and Yakun whose staff and family members form part of the international entrepreneurial "migrants" who undertake frequent travel and short stays abroad to manage their overseas operations. Of course, there are also new, reinvented, hybrids and further hybrids of food dishes offered, some setting off food crazes and culinary wars, such as over laksa, chicken rice, beancurd, nasi padang and kaya toast,[35] which are in part expressions of the competition.

Kopitiam Heritage

In the intense culinary competition, location, tradition, culture and heritage are all invoked to maximize business claims and opportunities, with the players themselves claiming direct experiences, such as former *kopi kias* Pang Lim and Lim Bee Huat. Botak Jones' entry into the heartland kopitiam scene with American foods is but the most recent. Longer time kopitiam and food operators consciously invoke heartland intimacy and specific elements of tradition, culture and heritage which play on memory, nostalgia and even pride. Significantly, what is now perceived as part of tradition, culture and heritage is the `local kopitiam' itself. There is now sufficiently long evolution of the institution to have built tradition and thus sufficient space for recreating the past, historicizing the kopitiam and to invoke memory and nostalgia. Thus for example, the Koufo chain (`koufo' referring to the Chinese belief that it is a person's good fortune to feast on good food) claims to "reinvent the coffee shop traditions with a fusion of eastern and western techniques so that the company can evolve through modern management concepts and yet stay true to good old coffee shop traditions", and "to preserve the uniqueness of authentic Singapore hawker cuisines". It also claims to be able to personalize service with "friendliness and intimacy", because its shops are located in housing estates (www.koufu.com.sg/profilechampions.html). In another example, Killiney chain kopitiams recreate the atmosphere of the old Hainanese coffeeshop with period furnishings, décor and historical memorabilia. Its mission statement is "to keep the "*Kopitiam*" tradition going for this generation and for the many generations to come" while its tagline is "Welcome to the good old days". Hainanese Ya Kun's branding lies in its belief that "a good toast binds kinship, friendship and partnership" and its mission includes "to preserve its unique and rich heritage". Both Killiney-Kopitiam and Ya Kun have received `heritage' as well `spirit of enterprise' awards in recent years. It is thus also not surprising that a legal case involving the use of the name `Kopitiam' by two such operators took place in 1988 when the competition first began.[36]

In the claims of tradition, culture and heritage, the `ethnic' and multiethnic or multicultural elements are also played up through the history of each enterprise and through the foods sold, in which originality, authenticity and diversity are capitalized on. In this, the Hainanese operators' claim to both culinary and kopitiam heritage, already firmly established in the first half of the 20th century by Hainanese immigrants, is an outstanding example by virtue of having been among the first to start and to contribute through their unique fusion foods of

[35] For example, Han's linguine (Italian) in dark soya sauce (local). Yakun makes and sells its own brand of kaya of Hainanese origin and fame, The Straits Times, Toast to sweet success, 9 Mar 2009. For examples of the kaya craze, see The Straits Times, Spread some love around, 5 Dec 1999; for kaya toast `wars', see The Straits Times, Now who's the toast of the town?, 22 May 2005. Also see The Sunday Times, Famous food feuds, 11 Jan 2009.

[36] The legal tussle between Kopitiam Singapore Restaurant and the Kopitiam Pte Ltd over the exclusive use of the name `Kopitiam' resulted in the latter's favour as it was ruled that the term `kopitiam' was generic and could be used by anyone.
http://www.ipos.gov.sg//topNav/ipb/tra/KOPITIAM%20Copies%20A%20Cautionary%20Tale.htm

kaya, coffee, chicken rice, confectionery, etc. Indeed, the "Hainanese kopitiam" that has been foundational in `tradition' and `heritage' has become popularised and legendary within the now developed larger kopitiam culture.[37]

At the same time, operators are aware that kopitiams and foodcourts must continue to be multiethnic and multicultural in their foods sold or in their appeal to customers. Some such as Kopitiam has set up the Banquet chain of halal foodcourts (which is in reality a halal multicultural kopitiam) and Hans has set up several halal Hanis Café and Bakery outlets. Its director Mr Hans says: Although the majority of Singapore's population is Chinese, the Muslim population is also significant. This kind of food, at this price, should also be available to them (The Sunday Times 24 Aug 2009). For Koufo, it "… want[s] to nurture the inherent joy of sharing a meal or drink with family and friends, by providing friendliness and a spark of inspiration in the everyday life of people of all ages, social classes and ethnic backgrounds" (www.koufo.com.sg/profilehistory.html), while Komala's restaurant claims that "it is the commitment to such values [quality, value-for-money authentic Indian food, commitment to cleanliness and hygiene] that earned Komala 's popularity with the Indians, Malays, Chinese and tourists throughout its 50-year history in Singapore" (http://www.komalasweb.com/).

Finally, occupational pride and prestige have contributed to the push for recognition of the kopitiam as tradition and heritage. The low status of the kopitiam is fast changing, the examples of success set by Koufu, Yakun, Hans, Kopitiam, Bhavan, Komalas and Zam Zam and Sabar Menanti undoubtedly contributing to this change. Lim Bee Huat the "kopi king" still has a mission to accomplish: "to make the coffeeshop or hawker business respectable in the eyes of the people … to change the image of the coffeeshop as a `low grade' business … because the children of the `kopitiam men are afraid people will look down on them" (www.kopitiam.biz/content/showcontent.asp?section=success, The Kopitiam King, accessed 22 Sept 2008).

Whither Customers and Community?

For Singaporeans who "are drinking more coffee than ever" (The Straits Times, 19 Aug 2008), kopitiam culture is part of an everyday lifestyle that cuts across all class and ethnic backgrounds and in outlets that range from upmarket chains in the city centre to the quiet neighbourhood kopitiam in the heartland. For the local resident or customer, `coffee time' or mealtime in the kopitiam is an everyday experience or habitual affair; closure of the shop for renovation or a short holiday can cause personal inconvenience and psychological disorientation. For those who have moved into private housing returning to their former local kopitiam or for those rediscovering reinvented Killiney Kopitiam and Yakun,[38] it is a trip of memory and nostalgia.

There is now a huge variety of kopitiams and food outlets competing to keep up with customers' changing tastes as well as create new expectations of the coffeeshop experience. Customers are spoilt for choice, and beneficiaries to new, reinvented, hybrids and further hybrids of food dishes, food crazes and culinary wars. They move about kopitiams and other food outlets, and are not limited to neighbourhood ones especially on public holidays and weekends, unless they are locale-bound or cash-strapped. Still, for the ordinary heartland

[37] A recent television sitcom revolves around the kopitiam and is titled "Hainan Kopi Tales".

[38] The `10 places to get your cuppa', 20 May 2007 include Killiney Kopitiam and Yakun outlets.

residents, the neighbourhood kopitiam remains a place of choice in everyday life. In the growing competition between local neighbourhood kopitiams and bigger players who have taken over some shops in areas with larger customer bases and set up large foodcourts, the smaller ones in quieter streets and neighbourhoods are still better able to offer a sense of intimacy and community that the larger crowded ones may not.[39]

Summary and Conclusion

The story of the kopitiam in Singapore is deeply embedded within a larger historical and social narrative of migration and cultural diversity. Born out of the necessity for food and company by male immigrants of various ethnic backgrounds in colonial Singapore, the kopitiam served as simple eating place and social centre as well as became an economic niche for those with culinary and service skills or who had little choice but to work long hours at low wages in this trade. They were characterised by ethnic dimensions in their spatial locations, foods sold and customer bases. They also naturally evolved to become the social centre in the local community, serving as the site of its everyday life at the same time providing links to the outside world. Over time, but particularly through the abrupt change brought about resettlement into public housing heartlands, the monocultural village or street kopitiam has reinvented itself and evolved into a multicultural institution that is a cultural confluence of cuisine, clientele and community. Open to all, it fully displays the public culture of eating, drinking and talking that is considered by some as the national pastime, well beyond the basics of the necessity to eat.

The multicultural kopitiam in the HDB heartlands today remains the institution of local community and everyday public life, satisfying the basic need for replenishment, rest and recreation through culturally familiar foods, friends and fraternities. At the same time, it remains a link to the outside and larger world beyond their immediate everyday lives and communities, now visually through the news, views and cultures its large screen television offers and presents, often `live'. Its pluralism too continues to thrive through the meals, meetings and media it provide and enable in the lives of those who frequent it – old immigrants, their children and grandchildren, and new immigrants, and transient batches of foreign workers.

Singapore's iconic foods so closely associated with kopitiams constitute heritage in themselves. Clearly traceable to immigrant histories of various ethnic groups and their culinary inputs, food diversity, hybridisaton and fusion have been taken to new levels in recent years (think cheese or durian roti prata and spaghetti rendang) and popularised simultaneously as ethnic, national and multicultural. While some dishes may vanish and family cooking secrets die out, there are enough intergenerational transfers of cuisine skills, recorded recipes and creative players. Indeed, the thriving diversity and hybridization of foods attests to Singapore's multicultural inputs unique to the world[40] and in equally unique settings that the kopitiam settings are.

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[39] The issues of competition, tradition, heritage and community also further raise complex issues of the interplay between policies and market forces which are beyond the scope of discussion here.

[40] That food is characterized by a myriad of cuisines iconic of the presence of the different ethnic communities that make up the "multiracial" nation of Singapore has been pointed out earlier by Chua and Raja, 1997:1. *Mintz (2009)* takes note of Asia's role in enriching the world's foods, both nutritively and in terms of diversity and taste.

So how will the story of the multicultural go from here? So long as there is a cultural mix, there will be a multicultural kopitiam that is the confluence of cuisine, culture and community. And so long as there is a working class there will be a heartland kopitam. Even as customers and residents now move about more for food and company and in varied settings, it remains that the kopitiam culture is a way of everyday life and arguably makes the kopitiam, both of the old or new type, a quintessential Singapore experience and a living heritage site. And so long as food and eating out cultures remain strong in multicultural Singapore, the multicultural kopitiam will continue to thrive and evolve.

And how can the story of the multicultural kopitiam be appreciated? For the Chinese writer Lao She, "a big teahouse is like a miniature society", and his famous play "Teahouse" can be read as a metaphor for China in the 20th century. The play spans 50 years of modern Chinese history, witnessing the disintegration of the Qing Empire and the beginning of the struggle to build a modern nation-state through the portrayal of *xiao renwu*—ordinary characters—from all walks of life who frequented the Chinese teahouse. Like Lao She's "Teahouse", the kopitiam's evolving story can be a metaphor for Singapore,[41] telling a story of its immigrant and social history and that of its ordinary people and their lives, capturing their struggles for survival and livelihood and the evolution of Singapore's multiculturalism. But the story of multicultural kopitiam in Singapore is not concluded; it continues to unfold with dramatic developments before our very eyes today.

[41] Singapore playwright Kuo Pao Kun attempted to do so with his play "Kopitiam" which was performed in 1996.

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APPENDIX 1

Common Kopitiam Food (compiled from three kopitiam in Marine Parade and Bedok, August2008)

Drinks:
coffee (kopi kaw or kopi keras (strong brew) and kopi pok (weak brew) and tea; various combinations such as Milofee (mixture of coffee and chocolate milo), Neslo (Nescafe coffee and Milo) and Milo Dinosaur; homemade barley; and a wide range of bottled and canned drinks and beers (Tiger, Anchor, Guinness, Heineken, Carlsberg).

Breakfast foods:
"Hainanese" kopitiam-style half-boiled eggs, steamed or toast bread (with butter, kaya [preferably Nyonya or Hainanese style), various noodle dishes (Chinese, Malay), nasi lemak (Chinese, Malay), vegetarian foods (Chinese; chicken, duck, char siew, curry, beehoon, toufoo), cakes and desserts (Chinese, Malay), breads (Malay, e.g. roti Boyan, roti jala, roti john), and chapatti, prata, tosai, putu mayam and apam (Indian).

Chinese foods:
economy rice and vast assortment of meat and vegetable dishes, noodles (many styles and dialect origins), laksa (kampong, Penang, Katong and nyonya styles), rice with roast meats (chicken, duck, pork), fish soups, yong toufoo (sometimes with `no pork no lard' sign), tze char (dinner dishes by order), `dialect' dishes (such as Hainanese chicken rice, pork chop, curry, beef noodles and porridge; Teochew porridge; szechuan duck), rojak, pig's tail and organs soup, pig's trotters, fish head dishes, seafoods, frog legs and turtle soups, steamboat.

Malay-Muslim foods:
mee (rebus, siam, goring, soto, HongKong, kuah), bihun (soto, goring, Hongkong), kway teo (goring, HongKong), chicken wing, curry puff, goring (pisang, keledek, sukun), otak, putu piring, popiah, tom yam, tahu goreng, gado-gado, lontong, satay, nasi (rice) and dishes of many origins (nasi Padang, rawan, jenganan, lemak, sambal goring), kueh-mueh (assortment of cakes and desserts), roti (john, jala, boyan).

Indian and Indian Muslim foods:
rice, vegetable and murtabak meat curries, roti prata, chapatti, mee goreng, nasi (briyani, champur, goreng) curry fishhead, kambing soup, teh tarik.

Western foods:
local versions of Western foods (chops, steaks, grills, fries, burgers, pizzas, spaghetti)

Others:
Japanese, Korean, Thai, Szechuan, fusion (beef carpio ramen, XO fried rice and salad).

APPENDIX 2

Singlish Names for Some Common Drinks in Chinese Kopitiams and Hawker Centres

Coffees and Teas
Kopi kao kosong - thick black coffee, no sugar
Kopi sua - two cups regular coffee
Kopi-o po - light black coffee
Teh-o kosong po - light black tea, no sugar
Diao yue (fishing in Mandarin) - Chinese tea
Yuan yang (celestial harmony in Mandarin) - coffee and tea mix (also known as `cham', from the Malay word `campur' (mix)

Beverages
Milo dinosaur - thick Milo topped with Milo powder
Thak kiew (football in Hokkien) - Milo

Others
Ah Huay (flower girl in Hokkien) - chrysanthemum tea
Michael Jackson - mix soy bean milk with grass jelly drink
Ang ji kow (red-tongued dog in Hokkien) - stout beer
Pepsi siew tai - Pepsi Light
Coke kosong - Coke Zero